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Review Article

# History, Memory, and Urban Symbolic Geographies: Recent Contributions to the Historiography of Vilnius

**Theodore R. Weeks**, *Vilnius between Nations, 1795–2000* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015), 308 pp.

**Dangiras Mačiulis and Darius Staliūnas**, *Lithuanian Nationalism and the Vilnius Question, 1883–1940* (Marburg: Herder Institut, Studien zur Ostmitteleuropaforschung, 2015), 236 pp.

Ever since Pierre Nora's work in the 1980s on *lieux de mémoire,* research on the relationship between history and memory has grappled with changing perceptions, constructions, and representations of space.[1] Questions of how people attach meanings to their surroundings, how collective identities crystallize around particular places and sites, and why particular locations come to be associated with specific values, emotions, and morals, have all featured prominently in recent research. Scholars of Central and Eastern Europe have actively engaged with this so-called "spatial turn" as a means of studying the ways in which changing borders and geopolitical regimes over the last two hundred years have shaped the region's mnemonic landscape. Cities have often been at the focal point of this research, as sites of diverse and sometimes contested collective memories.[2]

Studies of different efforts to symbolically and physically appropriate certain cities and their surrounding territories by different actors and communities have made important contributions to our understanding of the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These works have drawn on a variety of different sources and methods in order to investigate how cities were constructed as reference-points for different collective identities and political projects, ranging from studies of the urban built-environment focusing on architecture or monuments, to studies concentrating on popular history writing, educational curricula, museums, and commemorative events, to name but a few. Notably contributions to this field include Felix Ackermann's (2011) book on twentieth-century Hrodna/Grodno, which uses the palimpsest as metaphor for understanding how different ac-

1 Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard 1984).

2 For a more detailed discussion of this literature, see the following survey essays: Nick Baron, "New Spatial Histories of Twentieth Century Russia and the Soviet History: Surveying the Landscape," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 55:3 (2007), pp. 374–400; Nick Baron, "New Spatial Histories of 20th-Century Russia and the Soviet Union: Exploring the Terrain," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9:2 (2008), pp. 433–447; Theodore Weeks, "Urban History in Eastern Europe," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10:4 (2009), pp. 917–933; Mark Gamsa, "Cities and Identity, War, and Memory in the Baltic Region," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15:3 (2014), pp. 621–635. See also the edited volume: Jörg Hackmann and Marko Lehti, *Contested and Shared Places of Memory: History and Politics in North Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2013).

tors and political regimes have inscribed a city with meaning over time, and how these different layers can coexist; Tatiana Zhurzhenko's (2014) work on how borderlands cities become the focal point of memory politics both on the domestic and international scale; and Uileam Blacker's use of Polish, Ukrainian and Russian literary sources to analyze the ways urban spaces are represented and inscribed with meanings in the cases of Lemberg/Lwów/Lviv (2014) and Königsberg/Kaliningrad (2015).[3] These are just several recent examples of the ways in which studies of cities have contributed to our understanding of the nexus of different national historiographies and collective memories.

The two books under review bring the city of Vilnius/Vilna/Vilne/Vil'nia/Wilna/Wilno (hereafter Vilnius) into this broader discussion of the contested histories and memories in and of cities.[4] As Weeks argues, "while East-Central Europe abounds with multiethnic, multireligious cities, none of these—not L'viv nor Cluj, not Riga or Yerevan, not Łódź or Baku—figures so centrally [as Vilnius] in several different national mythologies."[5] The city was the capital of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (both prior to the 1386 union and within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), before being incorporated into the Russian Empire in the late eighteenth century, where it became the capital of the Vil'na governorate (Виленская губерния) and the center of the North-Western territory (Северо-Западный край). During World War I, the city was occupied by the German Empire as part of the semi-colonial polity of *Ober Ost*, and changed hands several times in 1919–1920 between the Polish Army and Bolshevik Russia. In late 1920, the Polish Army regained the city and made it the capital of the Republic of Central Lithuania, before incorporating it in 1922 into Poland proper. This move was strongly contested by the government of newly independent Lithuania from its "temporary" capital in Kaunas, and remained a sticking-point in interwar Polish-Lithuanian diplomatic relations. In 1939, the Soviet Union gave the city to Lithuania after the Kremlin's invasion of eastern Poland, and after World War II it became the

3 Felix Ackermann, *Palimpsest Grodno: Nationalisierung, Nivellierung und Sowjetisierung einer mitteleuropäischen Stadt 1919–1991* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2011); Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "The Border as Pain and Remedy: Commemorating the Polish-Ukrainian Conflict of 1918–1919 in Lviv and Przemyśl," *Nationalities Papers* 42:2 (2014), pp. 242–268; Uileam Blacker, "Urban Commemoration and Literature in Post-Soviet L'viv: A Comparative Analysis with the Polish Experience," *Nationalities Papers* 42:4 (2014), pp. 637–654; Uileam Blacker, "Writing from the Ruins of Europe: Representing Kaliningrad in Russian Literature from Brodsky to Buida," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 93:4 (2015), pp. 601–625.

4 For works on this topic by the authors in other languages, see: Darius Staliūnas, "V poiskakh litovskoi litvy: litovskoe natsional'noe dvizhenie i protsess konstruirovaniia natsional'noi territorii (do 1914 g.)," *Ab Imperio* 1 (2015), pp. 125–174; Dangiras Mačiulis and Darius Staliūnas*, Vilnius: Lietuvos sostinė: problema tautinės valstybės projekte* (Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos institutas, 2015); Dangiras Mačiulis, Alvydas Nikžentaitis and Vasilijus Safronovas, "L'appropriation symbolique d'une ville multiculturelle: les cas de Kaunas, Klaipėda et Vilnius," *Revue germanique internationale* 11 (2010), pp. 41–60; Theodore Weeks, "Vilna, Wilno, Vilnius 1863–1939: une étude de cas sur les cultures parallèles et sur 'l'Autre' invisible," *Revue germanique international* 11 (2010), pp. 79–102.

5 Theodore Weeks, *Vilnius between Nations, 1795–2000* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015), p. 2.

capital of the Lithuanian SSR. Since 1991, the city has been the capital of independent Lithuania.

These multiple changes in political regimes and borders, and the dramatic demographic transformations as a result of the wars and Holocaust in the twentieth century, means that Vilnius has variously been claimed as a historically and culturally "Polish" city, the "Jerusalem of the North," a Russian provincial city and the center of the North-Western borderlands, the Lithuanian national capital, and a historical and organizational center for the Belarusian national movement. Timothy Snyder's first section in *The reconstruction of nations* for several years stood as the most comprehensive discussion in recent Anglophone historiography of these intertwining territorial and discursive claims over Vilnius in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[6] It was followed in 2010 by a special issue of *Revue germanique internationale* on the "shared memories" in and of Baltic cities, which included articles by Weeks and Mačiulis et al. on Vilnius.[7] Two personal accounts covering Vilnius' history were also published at this time.[8] Nevertheless, Vilnius has generally remained somewhat neglected in the broader debates on history and memory in Eastern Europe, an unfortunate characteristic of much scholarship on the territories of present-day Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania which still struggles to find an audience outside of the narrow specialism of "Baltic Studies." The two works under review—the first book-length English-language studies on this topic—are encouraging examples of recent efforts to portray local dynamics within the Baltic region wrought large within broader theoretical questions and historical developments. By presenting Vilnius as a site of struggle between different individual actors, political parties, and states which sought to shape perceptions of cities and assert territorial claims to the land and people around them in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they engage with the disciplinary intersections between history, memory politics, and urban studies. The discussion of the particular case of Vilnius is also set against the backdrop of the broader transition from imperial to ostensibly national concepts of territorial organization.

## Histories and Memories in and of Wilno/Vil'na/Vilnius

In *Vilnius between nations,* Weeks traces the various ways in which Vilnius was mentally and physically claimed by Poles, Belarusians, Jews, Russians, and Lithuanians from the incorporation of the city into the Russian Empire in 1795 to around the year 2000. Weeks paints a rich picture of the policies and activities undertaken by individual actors, local cultural institutions, political parties, and (in the twentieth century) governments to stake out ownership according to different political and national projects. Weeks demonstrates how various meanings were negotiated, modified, overwritten, and how certain individuals—officials, intellectuals, experts, foreigners, locals—sought to impose their stances and agendas. Different strategies of symbolic appropriation

6 Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 15–102.

7 See fn. 4.

8 Laimonas Briedis, *Vilnius: City of Strangers* (Budapest; New York: CEU Press; and Vilnius: Baltos Lankos, 2009); Tomas Venclova, *Vilnius: a Personal History* (Riverdale-on-Hudson, N. Y.: Sheep Meadow Press, 2009).

are examined, from propaganda, cultural, and educational activities, to the renaming streets and construction of monuments. Weeks explores how these could later be transformed and used to justify more repressive measures from the restrictions on the use of certain languages, scripts, and practicing of religions, to violent actions of genocide and ethnic cleansing of the twentieth century in the name of creating a more ethnolinguisitically homogenous "national" city. Weeks should be praised for presenting us with a sufficiently complex and nuanced study, which also pays close attention to the agency of the city's inhabitants and how they responded to these top-down efforts to inscribe the city with meaning, either by supporting, resisting, remaining indifferent, or exploiting them for personal gain.

Weeks' monograph is divided into eight chapters which follow the established chronology of geopolitical regime and border changes, as well as the watersheds of the failed Polish-Lithuanian uprising of 1863 and two World Wars. At first glance, the chapter titles—which include references to "Polish and Jewish" Vilnius (1795–1862), the period of "Russification" (1863–1914), "Polish" Vilnius (1919–1939), and the building of "Lithuanian" capital (1985–2000)—might suggest that the narrative will proceed according to a consecutive sequence of different "national" phases in the city's history. Instead, in each chapter Weeks presents us with a detailed an examination of a wide range of sources in many languages, from guidebooks and maps, to photos, newspapers, and diaries, in order to trace the interactions between the city's symbolic and physical appropriation by different religious, socioeconomic, cultural, ethnolinguistic, and national groups, rather than writing about them in strict isolation.[9] Resonating with Ackermann's work on the city as a palimpsest, Week looks at what persisted between these different periods as well as what has changed.

Weeks is clearly influenced by David Frick's approach in his ground-breaking monograph *Kith, kin, and neighbors*, in not needing to posthumously claim Vilnius for any specific national group.[10] Policies and projects which we might understand as aiming to "nationalize" the city—particularly in the Lithuanian case—are presented as just one of many projects which sought to ascribe different meanings to the city at various times. In doing so, Weeks succeeds in presenting us with a refreshing way of writing the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Vilnius that goes beyond a narrative merely detailing the interactions between various nationalizing projects. At the same time, Weeks addresses the question of why Vilnius' history over the past two hundred years has come to be popularly and often unquestioningly perceived in such black-and-white national terms. Interweaving his narrative with a rich survey of the the preceding two centuries of historiographical literature in different languages on the city, and the controversies between multiple interpretations, Weeks shows how various events and famous personalities (such as Adam Mickiewicz/Adomas Mickevičius/Адам Міцкевіч or Czesław Miłosz) from Vilnius' past continue to have a dynamic mnemohistorical "afterlife."[11] In doing so, he draws attention to the potency of

9 For a recent example of this tendency see: Mark R. Hatlie, *Riga at War 1914–1919: War and Wartime Experience in a Multi-ethnic Metropolis* (Marburg: Herder Institut. Studien zur Ostmitteleuropaforschung, 2014). In his study of early twentieth-century Riga, Hatlie covers the city's German, Jewish, Russian, and Latvian inhabitants in separate chapters:

10 David A. Frick, *Kith, Kin, and Neighbors: Communities and Confessions in Seventeenth-century Wilno* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

11 Marek Tamm, ed., *Afterlife of Events*: *Perspectives on Mnemohistory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2015).

such nationalizing narratives in shaping historiography, public histories, and collective memories of Vilnius' history subsequently. Weeks also taps into the recent work on nationalism studies of the past ten years which has sought to challenge teleological narratives of national awakening by drawing attention to the hard work, protracted efforts, and failed projects by different intellectuals and political activists to shape and popularize meanings, not only through written or spoken rhetoric, but also by attempting to physically alter the urban landscape of the city.

The interplay between the urban built environment and the symbolic appropriation of the city by different parties plays an important role in Week's work. He looks at how meanings are inscribed in the very materiality of places and not only through imagined and symbolic geographies of landscapes. As Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen write in their introduction to a special issue of *Nationalities Papers* devoted to narratives of the nation in urban space:

> More recently, scholars have augmented this interest in symbolism with attention to the governance and experiential aspects of (re-)structuring urban spaces and identities. Instead of being reflections of unequal power relations, emphasis on the practices of governance positions the shaping of urban space as central to the negotiation and contestation of social identities.[12]

Likewise, Weeks argues that "throughout the modern period, Vilna/Wilno/Vilnius existed on at least two planes: on the hilly terrain on the eastern edge of what is now the Republic of Lithuania and in the minds of its residents, visitors and exiles."[13] These two dimensions are not treated as Cartesian categories of real *versus* imagined, but are deeply interwoven. Building on Frick's approach of looking at different areas of the city as an indication of its make-up and the relations between its different inhabits, Weeks describes the construction of churches, cemeteries, schools, printing houses, theatres, and cultural centers. He documents the various changes of street names and the erection of monuments and statues, as different parties sought to reshape and claim the urban environment, as well as the controversies among the local inhabitants over these changes. He compares different maps and guidebooks which sought to guide visitors to the city along different routes, drawing their attention to different elements of the urban landscape, and presenting them with different narratives and means of reading the city. The result is a thought-provoking study of Vilnius as a site of struggles between different individual actors, political parties, and states who sought to shape perceptions of cities and assert territorial claims to the land and people around them.

## The Making of a Lithuanian Capital

*Lithuanian nationalism and the Vilnius question* is a translation of the Lithuanian-language *Vilnius—Lietuvos sostinė: problema tautinės valstybės projekte* published earlier the same year.[14] Mačiulis and Staliūnas take a narrower focus than Weeks and address the specific question of why Lithuanian intellectuals in the late nineteenth and first half

12 Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen, "From Socialist to Post-Socialist Cities: Narrating the Nation through Urban Space," *Nationalities Papers* 41:4 (2013), p. 491.

13 Weeks, *Vilnius between Nations*, p. 236.

14 See fn. 4.

of the twentieth century came to see Vilnius as the Lithuanian capital. This question becomes all the more intriguing when considering that, as the authors note, there were numerically more people identifying themselves as Lithuanians in St Petersburg, Riga, and Libava/Libau/Liepāja (in today's Latvia) than in Vilnius at the end of the nineteenth century.[15] Hence, from a purely ethnolinguistic perspective, Kovno/Kowno/Kowna/Kovne/Kauen/Kaunas—the capital of interwar Lithuania—might have been the obvious choice for the national capital. The efforts undertaken by Lithuanian intellectuals to construct Vilnius as a Lithuanian capital are presented as a case study which highlights how historical arguments—in this case the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania—could prove a stronger foundation for imagining and legitimizing the geographical space, borders, and center of an alleged nation-state than ethnolinguistic criteria.

Mačiulis and Staliūnas' book begins in 1883, the year of the publication of the first Lithuanian national newspaper *Auszra/Aušra,* which they argue marked the birth of the idea among Lithuanian intellectuals of Vilnius as the capital of Lithuania which had been "lost" in bygone years to Poles, Jews, and Russians. The majority of the book however is devoted to the post-1904/5 period, with subsequent chapters covering World War I, the uncertain years of 1918–1923, the interwar period between 1923–1939, and the "recovery" of Vilnius in 1939–1940. In these sections, the authors trace the evolution and "implementation among the masses" of the idea of Vilnius as an inherently Lithuanian city.[16] Mačiulis and Staliūnas base their study on sources drawn mainly from the periodical press in order to unravel the intellectual history of the idea of Vilnius as a Lithuanian city which was "kidnapped" by Poland after World War I, and now needed to be "reclaimed" by Lithuania. This analysis is complimented with material from geography textbooks, literary sources, and maps, which were used to symbolically appropriate landmarks from the built environment, such the Gates of Dawn and Gediminas Castle, as fundamental parts of Lithuania's cultural and political history. The publisher should be praised for allowing the inclusion of so many color illustration—photos, newspaper caricatures, and posters—which richly compliment the text.

Unlike Weeks, Mačiulis and Staliūnas do not cover the views and activities of Vilnius' Jews, Poles, and Russians in great detail; they are discussed only in terms of the counter-narratives they presented to the Lithuanian claims. Instead, Mačiulis and Staliūnas devote more space to contextualizing the changing ideas about Vilnius as the Lithuanian national capital within broader contemporary debates about the geographical space and borders of Lithuania, the Lithuanian "geo-body," to use Thongchai Winichakul's term.[17] Building on Vytautas Petronis' in-depth research into the cartography of the Lithuanian national territory and the edited volume by Staliūnas on the spatial concept of Lithuania in the long nineteenth century, the authors seek to explain how Lithuanian intellectuals sought to locate the center of their national movement and the role of Vilnius in proposals for a future autonomous (and later independent) Lithuania.[18] In addition to detailing the different visions of a historical- and/or ethnolinguisti-

15 Mačiulis and Staliūnas, *Lithuanian nationalism and the Vilnius Question,* p. 28.

16 Ibid., p. 3.

17 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: a History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

18 Vytautas Petronis, C*onstructing Lithuania: Ethnic Mapping in Tsarist Russia, ca. 1800–1914* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2007); Darius Staliūnas, ed., *Lietuvos erdvinės sampratos ilgajame XIX šimtmetyje* (Vilnius: Baltijos kopija, 2015).

cally-defined Lithuanian polity which were intensely debated by different actors at the turn of the twentieth century, the authors also illuminate economic arguments which were made about Vilnius as a center of trade and industry, geopolitical discussions about the need to create a strong state, debates about the extent to which ecclesiastical and state borders should overlap, and geographical ideas about the shape of Lithuania's "natural" topographical boundaries. In doing so, the authors draw attention to the intensive efforts by national activists to spread awareness of Lithuanian national consciousness through institutions, cultural events, religious pilgrimages, and Lithuanian-language printing following the end of the Latin-script print prohibition in 1904. *Lithuanian nationalism and the Vilnius question* stands as a valuable contribution into our understanding of Lithuanian intellectual history in the first half of the twentieth century and Lithuanian-Polish relations during the interwar period.

## Contributions to Vilnius' Historiography

Although the scopes, approaches, and questions asked by both the books are different, the authors reach similar conclusions, namely that the mental appropriation of Vilnius as a specifically Lithuanian city came rather late (it was mainly an early twentieth century phenomenon) and emerged as a result of the challenge of competing national movements which incentivized Lithuanian intellectuals to define Vilnius as the capital of a future autonomous (and later independent) Lithuania. When examined in parallel, Weeks' book emerges as the more accessible for audiences not familiar with the region's history as he devotes his first chapters to sketching the historical context to the "Vilnius question." Mačiulis and Staliūnas' book, by contrast, quickly immerses the reader after only a brief five-page introduction in a detailed account events surrounding the publication of *Auszra*/*Aušra* in 1883. The absence of a more substantial introductory background chapter also draws attention to the rather basic definition of national movements employed by Mačiulis and Staliūnas': they write that "The phrase *national movement* [...] defines a social movement that pursues the implementation of the above-mentioned ideals until the nation state is created."[19] Mačiulis and Staliūnas thus conceptualize national movements as having a definitive starting point (they argue 1883, the publication of the first volume of *Auszra*/*Aušra*) and endpoint (the creation of the nation-state). This approach overlooks how nation-building was an ideal that was ultimately working towards an unattainable goal, thus had no conclusion. As demonstrated by Weeks in his chapters on the Soviet and post-1991 periods, national movements do not simply stop after the formal creation of the nation-state. Similarly, more explanation is needed of terms such as "Lithuanization" and "Polonization," which are often employed by Mačiulis and Staliūnas without qualification. This is rather surprising considering Staliūnas' nuanced discussion of the concept of "Russification" in his much-praised *Making Russians. Meaning and practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863*.[20]

Both monographs deliberately place the role of Vilnius in the Belarusian national imagination at the fringes of their narratives. While Vilnius very briefly (for just five

19 Mačiulis and Staliūnas, *Lithuanian Nationalism and the Vilnius Question*, p. 4.

20 Darius Staliūnas, *Making Russians: Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007).

months) functioned as the capital of the short-lived Lit-Bel SSR in 1919, the authors dismiss this period as a failed project and argue that the city was not perceived as a significant contender for the center of the Belarusian nation-state in the early twentieth century. While it is true that the Belarusian political claim to Vilnius was not as loudly voiced as in the Lithuanian or Polish cases, this line of argument minimizes the significant Belarusian historical claims to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania—or Litva—as its proto-state and, by extension, to Vilnius as an Early Modern Belarusian capital where Ruthenian (sometimes regarded as Old-Belarusian) was the official language for a time. The Belarusian geographer Arkadz Smolich (1891–1938), for example, included the city in his definition of the Belarusian historical-geographical space in *Geografiia belarusi*.[21] Moreover, as Per Anders Rudling has demonstrated in his recent book, *The rise and fall of Belarusian nationalism, 1906–1931*—which neither Weeks' nor Mačiulis and Staliūnas' cite—Vilnius also played an important role as an organizational center for Belarusian national activists in the early twentieth century and many important Belarusian nationalist publications were printed there.[22]

These minor points aside, English-language monographs on Lithuanian history do not come around very often, let alone the publication of two such important contributions to the historiography of late modern Vilnius in the same year.[23] These works stand testament to the fact that current scholarship on Vilnius—and indeed the history of the territory of present-day Lithuania more generally—is making an important contribution to debates on history and memory, and an example of a multi-ethnic region situated at the constellation of Polish, Jewish, Russian, Lithuanian, and Belarusian historiographies and collective memories. Both books give plenty of cause for optimism concerning the future direction of scholarship.

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21 Arkadz Smolich, *Geografiia Belarusi* (Vilnius: Drukarnia "Promen'," 1919).

22 Per A. Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism, 1906–1931* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015). For an English-language translation of a popular history which presents the Grand Duchy of Lithuania with Vilnius as its capital as an Early Modern Belarus, see Lubov Bazan, *A History of Belarus: A Non-literary Essay That Explains the Ethnogenesis of the Belarusians*. Translated from Russian by Callum Walker (London: Glagoslav Publications, 2014). Norman Davies also devotes a chapter to Litva in *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-forgotten Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), pp. 232–308. Vilnius today continues to function as a Belarusian intellectual hub and several NGOs promoting Belarusian intellectual and cultural activities continue to be located in the city, notably the European Humanities University (Еўрапейскі гуманітарны ўніверсітэт – ЕГУ).

23 Another recent contribution to the historiography of Vilnius in the Early Modern period is Irina Gerasimov, *Pod vlast'iu Russkogo Tsaria: sotsiokul'turnaia sreda Vil'ny v seredine XVII veka* (St. Petersburg: Evropeiskii universitet v Sankt-Peterburge, 2015).